

VI

DANTE AND THE RENAISSANCE

OF all the loose, misleading, question-begging phrases used in history, the word Renaissance is by common consent easily the worst. One of the few things, however, that can be definitely asserted of the Renaissance is that Dante had nothing to do with it. If the Renaissance has any meaning, it stands for a revival of the Pagan spirit, in art, thought, life, and immorality. Now Dante's "Comedy" is the Christian epic par excellence, the very soul of the Middle Ages, although our latest major prophet, H. G. Wells, achieved the feat of expounding medieval civilization without mentioning Dante's name. Victor Hugo appropriately termed Dante "the last of the great gothic cathedrals"; there is in the vision of the poet the same multitudinous and organic logicalness, the same weird writhing under spiritual pain, the same mystic ecstasy as in these grandest dreams that man ever hewed out of stone. Dante, moreover, far from being ahead of his times, was decidedly behind his generation: a dreamer of vanished Utopias, a prophet of the past, whilst Europe around him had already dismissed and half forgotten the phantasmal hopes and fears he wove, and opened her eyes to the realities of the new day. His religion was medieval Catholicism undefiled. A powerful reasoner, he has in him no touch of the rationalist; an outspoken critic of prelates and popes, he is in no sense a protestant. His faith is bound up with all the ecclesiasticism and theology of his day, or of

the day just before. The very souls in Purgatory, according to his poem, observe the church ritual which to him was part of the unchanging order of the universe. That church, at the very moment of his writing, was shaken to its foundations, never again to be the all-inclusive spiritual power whereof he dreamed. At the time when his Vision came to him, Boniface VIII was celebrating at Rome the greatest jubilee the Eternal City had ever witnessed; but within a few years the papacy was subjected to the degrading "Captivity of Babylon"; the Pontiff was the tool of the French king. Then followed the long scandal of schism—two and three Popes hurling anathema at each other's heads. Hardly was unity restored when the seamless garment was rent once more by the hands of Luther. The church is eternal; but the unity to which the Middle Ages so passionately aspired, and which was the key of Dante's thought, was shattered for centuries, and, as far as we are able to foretell, forever. His theology harks back to the magnificent achievement of the greatest of schoolmen, Thomas Aquinas. But scholasticism had already reared too high its dizzy fabric on the slender basis of Aristotelian logic: with Duns Scotus, Dante's contemporary, it was already toppling down into the inane. The once great names were soon to be turned into terms of reproach: the Most Subtle Doctor enriched our vocabulary with the word Duncie; scholasticism was to become synonymous with "interminable and pedantic disputations about points remote from any spiritual or material reality—a logical mill grinding naught." Already Roger Bacon had sounded his sharp note, heralding the morn.

Dante's political dream was no less obsolete. The days of the Ottos, the Henrys, the Fredericks, were gone never to return. No genuine Cæsar was to come at his passionate

call and fulfil his prophecies; he himself was conscious that there had been no emperor in his exalted meaning of the term for many generations. The Veltro,¹ the hound which was to save Italy, is still puzzling all commentators. When an emperor, Charles V, appeared again in his might, it was only to seal the decadence of Italy. "It seems to be a law of intellectual development," says John Addington Symonds, "that the highest works of art can only be achieved when the forces which produced them are already doomed and in the act of disappearance. Those who would comprehend the spirit of Italy upon the point of transition from the Middle Ages must study the 'Divine Comedy'; those who would contemplate the genius of the Renaissance, consummated and conscious of its aim, upon the very verge of transmutation and eventual ruin, must turn to the 'Orlando Furioso.'"² "Une rose d'automne est plus qu'une autre exquise," runs the poignant line of the grim old Huguenot d'Aubigne; Dante is the splendid autumnal rose of an epoch, full-blown, and the very last.

Between periods in civilization there frequently lies an interregnum; but the retrospective character of Dante is emphasized by the fact that he stood so very near the actual beginning of the Renaissance. To quote Symonds again—for where could we find a more delightful guide to Italian culture?—"Of two brooks in the Alps, within earshot of each other, one may flow into the Rhine, the other into the Danube."³ Thus Dante and Petrarch. Petrarch was sev-

¹ "Inferno," I, 101-111.

² J. A. Symonds, "Italian Literature," II, 3. G. Carducci expresses the same thought: "Ora Dante, com'è natura de' poeti veramente grandi di rappresentare e conchiudere un gran passato, Dante fu l'Omero di cotesto momento di civiltà" ("Dello Svolgimento della Letteratura Nazionale," Discorso Terzo, V).

³ J. A. Symonds, "The Revival of Learning."

enteen years old at the time of Dante's death, yet they are worlds apart; Petrarch is the first in date of truly modern men. Thus Dante and Boccaccio. Boccaccio might have remembered the sound of Dante's living voice. He admired the divine poet, lectured upon him, wrote his biography; but he did not understand him. He made Beatrice carnal and not spiritual: "between him and the enthusiasms of the Middle Ages a ninefold Styx already poured its waves."¹

We shall see that this opposition between the spirit of Dante and that of the Renaissance was no superficial antinomy of artistic technique: it was the fundamental feud between the Christian and the "natural man"—that natural man whose energies, whose pleasures, and whose vices were so magnificently released by the reviving Pagan gods. This opposition was felt almost immediately: within a generation the worship of Dante was already mingled with a sentiment of remoteness, of awe, shall we say of discomfort? May we not consider the appointment of lecturers to expound Dante as an ambiguous compliment? Certain it is that the age of the Renaissance ignored Dante as completely as it dared. Editions and commentaries still appeared—the eclipse was never complete. But the marvelous romantic grotesqueness of Hell, the theological music of Paradise, could no longer be enjoyed to the full. A. J. Butler² warns us that "the beginner in Dante study can pretty safely ignore everything written between 1400 and 1800. The Renaissance," he adds, "practically stifled anything like an intelligent study of Dante for those four centuries." It may seem odd to call Voltaire a late product of the Renaissance;

¹ J. A. Symonds, "Italian Literature," I, 102.

² A. J. Butler, "Dante, His Times and His Works."

yet he was that "average sensual man," the practical pagan, the worshiper of human reason, the determined classicist, that the Renaissance had moulded. The eighteenth century did but add a rococo pinnacle to the great classical temple of which the Renaissance had first traced the plan and laid the foundations. His iconoclastic comments, therefore, are significant; in his thin, sardonic voice he tells us what most of the French, and even many of the Italians, thought in their hearts: Dante had become a superstition, unworthy of the "age of enlightenment." . . . "The Italians," he writes in his "Philosophical Dictionary," "call Dante Divine. But it is a hidden divinity, and few are those who comprehend his oracles. He has had commentators: this is probably an additional reason for his not being understood. His reputation will endure because he is not read. There are in his works a score or so of passages that every one knows by heart: that is sufficient to spare one self the trouble of examining the rest. . . . Dante may find a place in the libraries of antiquarians, but he will never be read. People invariably fail to return to me some tome of 'Ariosto'; but no one has ever thought of stealing my Dante." Dante is no longer read in Europe, because everything in his works is an allusion to some "unknown fact." The one central fact in Dante, we may add, the fact that the Renaissance and the eighteenth century alike spurned or ignored, was Christianity. Voltaire proceeds to give a burlesque account of the "Comedy," and adds, "this hotch-potch has been considered as a great epic poem." He has, however, one good word to say for Dante: "A poem in which Popes are consigned to Inferno deserves our attention."¹

¹ Voltaire, "Dictionnaire Philosophique," art. Dante *Mélanges et Correspondance*, XXII, 174, XLI, 251.

But Voltaire was, like Ariosto, like Dante himself, the ultimate representative of an age on the point of dissolution. Rationalism draped in classical garb was soon to go the way of scholasticism. Within half a century of these mocking words Dante was to be again a living presence and Voltaire a grinning fossil. If Romanticism rehabilitated Dante, it was because Romanticism was essentially hostile to the spirit of the Latin Renaissance. The partial eclipse of Dante is practically coextensive with the undisputed sway of the classical doctrine, and the demonstration is complete.

YET—who thinks of denying it?—there is a vague but widespread feeling that somehow Dante and the Renaissance were not so alien to each other. This sentiment may be a delusion; even if it were, we should have to account for it, for it is part and parcel of Dante's fame: his figure would seem unfamiliar if there did not fall upon it at least a ray of Renaissance light. It behooves us, therefore, to analyze this sentiment and to extract from it whatever element of truth it may contain.

Perhaps the first foundation of this feeling is the confusion that still exists in our minds between the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages. Classical prejudices die hard; we are still apt to think of the whole millennium that elapsed between the downfall of the ancient world and the Revival of Learning as a murky wilderness of cruelty, superstition, and childish ignorance. Now the most casual reader knows that Dante is not a barbarian, therefore he cannot quite belong to the age that classical critics derided as "Gothic"; the first man to emerge from that somber chaos, he seems to us to herald the Renaissance.

The truth of the matter is that the Middle Ages were themselves a Renaissance—the eleventh century deserves

that name fully as much as the fifteenth. When the Blond Beasts so dear to the hearts of Teutomaniac historians swooped down upon enfeebled Rome, civilization was all but blotted out. The eclipse of the Western mind lasted for five hundred years. But soon after the year 1000, we feel the coming of a universal spring in all fields of human culture. Soon everything burst into flower: the crusading spirit, chivalry, monastic reform, epic and romance, guilds and communes, the universities and the cathedrals. It was the time when, in the joyous words of Raoul Glaber, "the earth was shaking off the rags of its antiquity, and clothing itself anew in a white mantle of churches." This age produced Godfrey of Bouillon and St. Louis, St. Bernard, Abelard, and Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, the Song of Roland, the love lyrics of the Troubadours, the romances of the Arthurian cycle: why should it not produce a Dante? Between him and his times there is no discrepancy. He is immeasurably greater than his predecessors and his contemporaries, no doubt; such is the privilege, such is the very essence of genius. But he belongs to their world of art, thought, and faith, to their world and to no other.

In a very definite sense Dante sounds strangely and delightfully modern; there is no need of deep Italian scholarship to realize that his language is very similar to that of the present day. To a Frenchman with an ordinary high-school education, the writers up to the fourteenth century are sealed, almost hermetically; even Villon is shrouded in linguistic difficulties. But whoever can read Italian can read Dante. This fact comes out most strongly when we compare the "Divine Comedy" with the masterpieces of other medieval literatures. The "Romance of the Rose" is, like Dante's poem, an encyclopedia in the form of a dream or

vision; the first part, written by William of Lorris, is a frail and prettily tinted allegory of the Art of Love; the second, by John of Meung, surprises us frequently with the independence and manly vigor of its thought, the vastness, and, all things considered, the soundness of its learning, the realism of its pictures. It enjoyed immense fame throughout Europe; a hundred and fifty years after its publication it was still the object of ardent controversies; it remained a favorite until the time of Marot, in the early Renaissance. But between John of Meung and the modern reader there is the formidable barrier of a different language; the "Romance of the Rose" is a document, it is not a classic. What shall we say of "Piers Plowman," likewise a symbolical vision, and at times one of the grandest written down by mortal man? Langland is hopelessly archaic, as most of you must have found out. Yet he wrote two or three generations after Dante. And even our own sunny and lucid Chaucer, so accessible in his sane and kindly thought, so consummate in his robust art, writing a whole century after the Florentine, many of us, if the truth were told, would find him more comfortable in a modernized version, and few can claim fully to comprehend him without a pretty copious glossary. This perennial, this miraculous freshness of Dante's language is, no doubt, the fruit of his very genius. He deserved to immortalize not only his thought, but his instrument; a reward that has been granted in so full a measure to no other man, not even to Shakespeare. Certainly neither John of Meung nor Chaucer could claim such imperial sway.

But apart from the commanding personality of Dante, the history of the Italian language affords a key to the problem. Its evolution was quite different from that of the Northern tongues; it was simpler, more sluggish. Latin

was indigenous in Italy, not superimposed, and the different Italian dialects remained fairly close to the parent language. For a time this very closeness hampered the use of the vernacular as a literary vehicle, for whoever could read and write could master Latin with comparative facility. Latin was thus, as late as the thirteenth century, the common language of culture in the peninsula; in the rest of Europe this was true only among the clerks. Dante himself hesitated between Italian and Latin for his great poem. Had he yielded to the scholarly prejudice, all his genius would hardly have saved the "Comedy" from the fate of "De Planctu Naturæ" or Petrarch's "Africa."

This belated emergence of Italian as a literary medium was a blessing in disguise: it was not used for any ambitious purpose until the thought of the age was definitely formed. Italy was spared the disheartening effort to express great but immature concepts with an inadequate vocabulary. Literary Italian knew no infancy: it was born an adult.

The continuity of its Latin tradition enabled Italian to skip another stage of development. There was a medieval French, made up of profoundly corrupted popular Latin, mixed with Celtic and Teutonic elements; then there was a Renaissance French, into which classical terms were forcibly introduced, often duplicating the medieval word, whose origin had become unrecognizable; finally there was a classical French, which sought to evolve order out of that chaos. Similarly we had Anglo-Saxon, then Anglo-Norman, blending into Chaucerian English; then a Latin invasion in the sixteenth century, the whole magnificently fused at last by the Elizabethan poets and King James' translators. Compared with these complex histories, that of Italian is simplicity itself. The language was from the very first composed of fairly homogeneous elements; the direct heir of

Rome, it did not have to be recast at the time of the Revival of Learning. Italian is living Latin; it did not have to be born anew, it needed no Renaissance. Dante is not modern, any more than the Italy of to-day is archaic; but between the two there is no gulf.

There may be a third reason for this enviable stability of the Italian language: it is its semi-artificial character. It will perhaps seem paradoxical to speak of the most musical of modern tongues as a sort of Esperanto; yet that thesis has been ably maintained—by whom? Why, by Dante himself. Until half a century ago there was, strictly speaking, no such thing as Italian, just as there was no such thing as Italy; there were Italian dialects and petty Italian states. The political unity, involving linguistic unity, that France achieved, roughly speaking, several centuries ago, had to wait in Italy until the days of the Risorgimento and popular education. Out of these many dialects of equal status, Tuscan, thanks to its intrinsic purity and beauty, thanks to the activity and prestige of Florence, thanks to the genius of the great Triumvirate, came to be adopted when it was desired to reach beyond the limits of a city-state. But the “*lingua aulica*,” the court language, that Dante strove to establish, is not spoken in its purity anywhere, not even in Florence, as Cardinal Bembo pointed out. It is a *lingua franca*, an auxiliary language, divorced from the daily speech of the mart and the home. Now a semi-artificial language is less liable to change than a popular dialect; its rules are fixed by precedent and convention, among gentlemen and scholars, not solely by the practice of the careless and ignorant crowd. It was only in the seventeenth century that French was taken resolutely in hand, “standardized,” in other words, that it was made partly artificial. Italian had reached the same point three hundred years earlier. Italian

has evolved as little since the days of Dante as French since the days of Corneille.

THESE linguistic considerations, however, do not fully account for the alleged Renaissance element in Dante. His language is modern; but if John of Meung had used classical French, he would still appear remote. We must approach the question from another side.

The Renaissance, in its widest sense, is a European movement the origins of which are not to be sought exclusively in Italy. Had the peninsula been closed to "the Barbarians," it is fairly obvious that the Western mind would have none the less experienced a sudden leap forward in the early sixteenth century. Invention and discoveries were fast altering the face of the medieval world. Neither gunpowder nor the printing press came from Italy; Copernicus was a Prussian Pole, although he did study at Bologna and Rome; the daring Spanish and Portuguese adventurers would undoubtedly have discovered the new Indies, even though no Genoese had opened the way. To denote this tremendous movement of expansion the word *Renaissance* is inadequate; for never before, even at the heyday of Greece or Rome, had man's horizon been so suddenly enlarged; never had it been tinged with the fabulous glow of such intellectual and material Eldorados, lying unconquered just below the verge. With this vast revolution in human experience, Dante, of course, had nothing to do. Enthusiasts claim that he saw the Southern Cross with the eyes of faith, before any European had consciously crossed the equator and returned to tell the tale. They see in his quaint little Saga of Ulysses' last voyage, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, an anticipation of the great Iberian epic of adventure. All this is fanciful. Even if we should accept with fullest credit

Dante's achievements in physics and astronomy,¹ they would not be sufficient to give him a place among the founders of modern science. Two words of Roger Bacon, "*scientia experimentalis*," outweigh in this respect the whole of Dante's contributions.

In pure and applied sciences, in geographical discoveries, in national politics, the Renaissance stirred the whole of Europe. Italy played her creditable part in this general progress, but the other countries were not dependent upon her leadership. The situation was entirely different in the realm of art and literature. There—without minimizing the brilliant development of Burgundy and Flanders—we may say that Italy reigned supreme. The Italian expeditions of the French kings, Charles VIII, Louis XII, Francis I, were the revelation of an enchanted world. The whole tone of culture became Italianate. Castiglione's *Courtier* was the code of good breeding; the French language was in danger of being Italianized and Henry Estienne had to utter a growl of warning.² Francis I surrounded himself with Italian artists. No doubt the Renaissance meant the revival of the antique ideal; but, we must be careful to add, the antique ideal interpreted, transmuted by Italy. Of this fact there is no clearer witness than architecture—so often the aptest symbol of a civilization. For two centuries architecture did but adapt Italian models to local traditions and conditions; it was not until late in the eighteenth century that Greco-Roman pastiches finally prevailed. Italy was the third but the most direct and potent of the classical influences. Perhaps, as Professor Raffaello Piccoli main-

¹ We refer particularly to the "*Quæstio de Aqua et Terra*," which Scartazzini and most other critics considered until recently as a forgery, but which scholars are now inclined to accept as genuine.

² Henri II Estienne, "*Deux Dialogues du nouveau langage françois italianisé et autrement déguizé*," 1578.

tains, we would be less blind to the fact if Italian civilization, its great work performed, had been swept away by a cataclysm three centuries ago; thus it would have achieved the crowning glory of genuine classicism, which is death.

Now we are coming to the core of our question. The whole Renaissance is tinged with Italianism: Dante is Italian of the Italians, the most complete representative of his race. This essential "Italianità" is the common element between Dante and the Renaissance.

One of the most obvious characteristics of the Renaissance spirit is the conscious cultivation and enjoyment of Art. It would be ludicrous to maintain that the craftsmen of the Middle Ages were not artists in the highest sense of the term; yet their chief appeal to us lies in something different from art, something which transcends art perhaps, and veils itself in apparent artlessness. We love them for their naïveté, for their indifference to formal beauty as such. We may in this be the dupes of an illusion: those humble and miraculous artisans may have been much more self-conscious than we think, keeping distinct in their minds purpose, technique, and personality. Erroneous or not, the impression exists. Now Italy developed early, and has preserved to the present day, an unusual gift for artistic expression; in this respect it is superior to ancient Rome, and ranks not far below Greece. Why is it that even a mediocre work of Italian art,—a picture of the Carracci, a Jesuit church, a *banal* melody,—unmistakably belongs to the world of art, whilst a more sincere and powerful product of the Northern spirit may strike us as uncouth? The natural gifts of the race and a long tradition of technical excellence partly explain such a superiority; but the fact of the matter is that we have learned our conception of art from Italy, and that it requires an effort for us to recognize as art anything that

is non-Italian. Now this feeling for art existed in Italy long before the Renaissance—unless we stretch the word Renaissance out of its usual meaning so as to include the whole of Italian culture. The English Preraphaelites discovered it in the Trecento and the Quattrocento. It shone forth in Dante. The Song of Roland has sincerity, brevity, a rare virtue in those days; rough-hewn epic grandeur and genuine pathos; with all these qualities it is not artistic. The Breton Romances, much less primitive, pour interminably the thin babbling brook of their octosyllabic couplets. John of Meung took twenty thousand lines to finish the slight allegory of William of Lorris; he has speeches 900 lines in length, and mazy digressions which lead nowhither. Compare with these amorphous productions the massy and symmetrical structure of the "Divine Comedy," as plain and robust in its main lines, as infinitely varied in its details, as the west front of Notre-Dame. Think of the three parts so exquisitely contrasted and balanced, of the hundred cantos progressing evenly toward the inevitable end. Think of the interlocking of the triple rhymes, so simple as never to suggest artifice or effort, yet so rigid that not a single line could be deleted or added. Compare the garrulity of Thomas and Beroul in their Tristan with the supreme reticence of Francesca's tragic story. "That day we read no farther."¹ What is the secret of the difference? Genius, no doubt, but also the principles of art, definitely grasped and resolutely applied. "The curb of art," says Dante at the end of "Purgatorio," "does not allow me to proceed."²

To this sense for the discipline of art we are tempted to

¹ "Inferno," V, 82-138.

² Ma perchè piene son tutte le carte

Ordite a questa cantica seconda

Non mi lascia più ir lo fren dell' arte. ("Purgatorio," XXXIII, 139-142.)

add a feeling for the beauty of nature. This also is a permanent trait in the Italian mind, and seems to have passed, in an unbroken pastoral tradition, from the author of the "Georgics" to the author of the "Arcadia." Of this sentiment Dante had his full share. Our space, however, is drawing short, and we prefer not to dwell on this aspect of the question, which might involve us in a tangled controversy.¹ The Middle Ages have not received full credit for their love of nature, or, to use a less equivocal term, for their love of the country. Dante's exquisite description of the Earthly Paradise strikes, indeed, no new note; troubadour and minnesinger had already discovered that the earth is fair in the spring. What we find in Dante is not the modern feeling for nature,—the blending of mood and sensation, the love of wild and dramatic scenery,—these were created by the Romantic school. His gift was a wonderful definiteness of vision; most of his similes are topical, accurate, and drawn from actual experience. The Renaissance writers do not offer such clear-cut realism. The equivalent of Dante's sharpness of line and freshness of color is rather to be found in the plastic arts of his own time; in the carved capitals of Rheims, on which humble plants are so lovingly, so faithfully reproduced; in the rose windows aflame at sunset; or in the quaint and vivid miniatures.

IN its most literal sense the Renaissance means the revival of Antiquity, the resurrection of the Pagan gods. The humanists carried this neopaganism to the verge of absurdity. The Saints, the Virgin, Christ himself, through the

¹ Burckhardt ("Italian Renaissance," pt. IV, ch. III) claims that Dante could not have climbed Bismantova for any other purpose but enjoying the view. The reference ("Purgatorio," IV, 26) is, however, vague and unconvincing; and Oscar Kuhns ("Treatment of Nature in Dante") thinks Burckhardt's interpretation "more than doubtful."

medium of Virgilian or Ciceronian diction, were distorted beyond recognition into purely classical personages. Art showed us martyrs that looked like gladiators, angels with the musculature of athletes, and saints draped in their ample togæ like senators. Had humanism developed unchecked, it seems that the incongruity would have been removed by the elimination of Christianity itself: the Rome of Leo X had gone far in that direction. This worship of antiquity, this audacious and seemingly unconscious blending of pagan and sacred traditions, no longer astonish us in the Renaissance. But when we find this same centaur-like combination of incongruous elements in Dante, medieval and theological Dante, well may we be struck with wonder. For the orthodox poet, it seems indeed as though the Bible and the *Æneid* were coördinate revelations. Not only is Virgil his model and his guide, but it seems as though to Virgil, as well as to Peter, had been given the promise that their word would bind and unbind the fate of souls. Rhipeus, a Trojan hero, is placed in Paradise, among those who loved and exercised justice, because Virgil proclaimed him a just man.¹ Indeed, it were waste of time to insist upon that point. The most casual reader has been struck with the Virgilian setting of most of the "Inferno." Nor are such strange touches lacking in Purgatory, where a mythological example is almost invariably set against a Biblical or Christian one. In his treatise "De Monarchia," Dante adduces as proofs of the imperial claims of Rome sundry miracles which are none other than the prodigies reported by Livy. No doubt even the Northern countries had not wholly forgotten Rome; yet it is sufficient to glance through the French poems of the Antique Cycle, the Romances of *Æneas*, of Thebes, and of Troy, to be conscious of a radical difference

¹ "Rifeo," Par. XX. The reference is to *Æneid*, II, 426-427.

between Dante and, for instance, Benoît of Sainte-Maure. The poems of the latter are absolutely unclassical: his heroes are medieval knights; Greece, Troy, and Rome do not seem to have any more definite meaning for him than Bagdad or Trebizond. For Dante, on the contrary, Virgil is in truth the "sweet father" with whom he has consorted for years on terms of tender and familiar veneration.

But, once more, this is no case of a prophetic dawn. Dante may be radically different from Benoît of Sainte-Maure; he is not different from his Italian contemporaries. Italy was still living consciously in the interminable twilight of Rome. Everywhere else the empire, the Latin language, the Latin myths and traditions, had been more or less painfully imposed upon alien populations—they could recede and disappear during the Dark Ages, leaving the faintest memory behind. In Italy, in spite of corruption and invasion, the Roman tradition had never been quite broken. Noble families still claimed shadowy descent from the patricians of old; cities still cherished as their Palladium some ancient statue, like that of Mars in Florence. Although crumbling under the pick-ax of the quarryman, the formidable works of ancient Rome were still awe-inspiring in their mass and beauty; between the daily speech of the common people in Imperial times and the medieval Italian dialects there had been no abrupt transformation. So medieval Italy remained classical to a degree unsuspected in the North; and, conversely, the most typical forms of medieval civilization, chivalry, feudalism, Gothic architecture, remained foreign elements in Italy. Italy evolved no medieval hero of her own to serve as the center of a national cycle; when she borrowed the heroes of the Carolingian cycle, she treated them in the freest spirit of banter. The *Æneid* was still the national Italian epic and Virgil the national Italian

poet. A few lines of sibylline prophecy had made it possible to enroll him among the witnesses of Christianity. He had become a magician, almost a saint: horoscopes were drawn from his works. Dante, therefore, was not looking forward, but only giving expression to the deep-rooted sentiment of his race, when he hailed Virgil as his guide, his master, and his lord.

There is, indeed, nothing in Dante's classical scholarship that is not of the type current in medieval Italy. The authors he knew well, Virgil, Ovid, Statius, were universal favorites. He made no effort to add anything to the standard list: he was not yearning for lost treasures. The classical canon satisfied his unquestioning faith as fully as the scriptural canon. For the Renaissance to be conceivable, the spirit of Petrarch was first required: a deep sense that antiquity had to be recovered. Too secure in what he possessed, Dante could not be among the seekers.

His worship of ancient Rome assumed, as we know, a political aspect. There is for him a sacred halo about the empire. Brutus and Cassius share with Judas the ultimate horror of punishment; to kill Cæsar is almost a deicide. Trajan, under whom the empire reached its perfection, is saved. We are all familiar with the wonderful flight of the Eagle and the splendid speech of Justinian. In this Dante was passionately clutching a vanishing shade—the dream of universal unity which had set the sacerdoce against the empire. Of this purely medieval conception there is hardly any trace in the works of the humanists or in the poems of the cinque-cento.

ONE of the most impressive characteristics of the Renaissance is the full development of splendid personalities. Leonardo da Vinci is the most illustrious example of many-

sided intensity and perfection; Benvenuto Cellini the most picturesque; but Italy was teeming with such demigods. It cannot be said that the age of St. Bernard had been lacking in striking individualities. But on the whole, medieval men seem to us curiously one-sided, and apt to lose their identity in the system—ecclesiastical or feudal—which formed the framework of their lives. We think of the warrior, the priest, or the bourgeois, rather than of Count Raoul, Abbot Odo, or Master Guillaume. The vast epic production is almost anonymous: the author's name, when we happen to know it, conveys very little information. The medieval ideal might be exemplified by the humble stone-cutter in the cathedral, willing to work silently at his appointed post for the glory of God. The men of the Renaissance, on the contrary, had ardent passions of the flesh and of the spirit, which, far from curbing, they flaunted to the world. Geniuses or ruffians, athirst for fame and pleasure, they were the nearest approach to the usual conception of the Nietzschean Superman, the prototypes of that Napoleon in whom Taine recognized a condottiere of Renaissance Italy. In contrast to such full-bodied and vivid figures, medieval men seem pale indeed. Armor and cowl may be picturesque, but the human features that peer from beneath them are indistinct.

Now Dante shared to the full this Renaissance quality of *virtù*, of all-round, untamed energy. No humanist, no despot or pontiff, no courtier or poet of a later age, was so many-sided or so intense as he. He was a politician, a soldier, a diplomat, a courtier—on a small stage no doubt, but the personality of the actor is not to be measured in terms of physical magnitude. He who dies in a skirmish offers as much as if he had been killed in a world-battle, and the citizen of a tiny state feels, not less, but more intensely than

if he had a hundred million compatriots. Dante knew power, battle, exile. He was a writer on political subjects, a philologist, a physicist, a scholastic philosopher, and a theologian; he was an artist too—what would the world give to recover those “angels” that Dante was fond of drawing!¹ He was even a husband and a father. And as though his life were not full to the brim, he found time to be all the time, and most of all, a poet and a lover. Whatever he did was done with an intensity, with a magnificent arrogance of personal power, which have never been equaled by any prophet of the strenuous life. “He trusted in himself more than in any other,” he quietly proclaims. He was irked by party loyalties, cursed his friends as vehemently as his foes, and stood, as such men must stand, erect and alone. The “Vita Nuova” is the first autobiographic romance; but it is in the “Comedy” that the heights of passionate self-assertion are reached—in the poem which, paradoxically enough, was meant to express the common beliefs of his age. It is the Human Soul which is taken on that pilgrimage through the triple realm of the life beyond. But it is, first of all, Dante Alighieri, the Florentine, with his alert senses, his fears, his fierce private hatreds, his great mystic love. He does not hesitate in consigning his personal enemies to the lowest hell; and of Beatrice he said, as he had promised, that which had never been said of any woman. Of medieval self-effacement there is in all this no trace: we find the virility of self-reliance, and almost the lawlessness of exulting pride—in a word, *virtù*.

Yet what are the names that embody most strikingly that ideal of *virtù* at the time of the Renaissance? Machiavelli, his idol Cesare Borgia, and Aretino: the man of genius who had lost his moral star; the princely ruffian; the brigand of

¹ “Vita Nuova,” XXXV.

letters, scurrilous and cowardly; all three names of ill repute. To this, and nowhere else, was the gospel of self-realization bound to lead. If the most gifted of European peoples slumbered so long under the yoke of Spain or Austria, the orgy of *virtù* must bear the blame.

Between this pure Renaissance type and Dante there is an abyss. Intense he may be, violent and proud; self-indulgent never. Once more, they are natural men, he is a Christian. At the core of his art, thought, and life we find ever the great idea of discipline. He seems, indeed, to have foreseen the growth of a generation that would spurn all curb; but, far from hailing it with delight, he condemned it with his utmost power. The "Fais que voudras" of Thélème, the triumphant motto of the Renaissance, is abhorrent to him. For the Epicureans he devised the condign punishments of his fifth and sixth cantos. There he places those who blur the sense of right and wrong, the "carnal sinners, who subject reason to appetite," Semiramis, "who made lust licit in her law."¹ The key-word here is *talento*, the natural appetite. Dante, with the whole of ascetic Christianity, stigmatizes the *talento* as sinful. Boccaccio, on the contrary, sings in all his works a hymn to *il talento*, the poetry of life, triumphant over medieval discipline. These works form the prelude to the paganism of the Renaissance, the resurgence of the natural man. "It was this *talento* that Valla philosophized, that Beccadelli and Pontano sang."² The survival of antique culture, and particularly the reverence for Virgil, on the one hand; the growth of intense personalities in the hotbeds of miniature states on the other,

¹ . . . i peccator carnali
Che la ragion sommettono al talento. ("Inferno," V, 38-39.)
(Semiramis) che libito fe' licito in sua legge. ("Inferno," V, 56.)

² J. A. Symonds, "Italian Literature," I, 102.

—these were enduring Italian traits, and belong exclusively neither to the Middle Ages nor to the Renaissance. But the philosophy of life—ascetic or naturalistic—separates two worlds. Boccaccio and his followers made “il gran rifiuto”; Dante did not.

He belonged, therefore, to the epoch of St. Francis, St. Dominic, and St. Thomas Aquinas, not to that of Valla and Rabelais. Does this mean that he is out of touch with modern thought? Carducci implied as much when he said: “He brought back with him the keys of the other world, and cast them into the abyss of the past; no one has ever found them again.”¹ Yet it is Dante, and not Boccaccio, Petrarch, or Ariosto, that young Italy has adopted for her hero. His creed may no longer be our creed, his thought may have become alien to us; but his art stands changeless, and his ideal unshaken: the free will of man ardently fighting God’s battle. And after all, it seems a trifle vain to tag upon him a medieval or a Renaissance label: he is human, that is all. The whims of diplomacy have parceled out the foothills of Mont Blanc among France, Italy, and Switzerland; but when we gaze at the giant, man-made boundaries are soon forgotten.

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¹ “Egli discese di paradiso portando seco le chiavi dell’ altro mondo e le gettò nell’ abisso del passato: niuno le ha più ritrovate.”—G. Carducci, “Dello Svolgimento della Letteratura Nazionale,” Discorso Terzo, V.